The "Soft Bigotry of Low Expectations" And Its Role in Maintaining White Supremacy through Mathematics Education

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Introduction

The articles in this volume of the Bank Street *Occasional Paper Series* document successes and struggles in supporting the teaching and learning of mathematics as critical mathematical inquiry (CMI). CMI efforts range from teaching mathematics for social justice to broadening school mathematics to making mathematics classrooms places where people want to participate, and more. CMI challenges systems of power and oppression, such as white supremacy, that exist in and operate through mathematics education (Battey & Levya, 2016; Martin, 2013, 2018). Any initiative that demands transfer of power away from those who possess it will always be countered by hegemonic forces that seek, instead, to maintain the status quo (Guinier & Torres, 2002). This means that those who engage with or advocate for CMI are vulnerable to forces whose expression can range from negative feedback from parents, students, or colleagues; disciplinary action from a school or district; or even targeted harassment on social or other media by white supremacists. Indeed, fears about such pushback are a known deterrent to CMI efforts (Simic-Muller, Fernandes, & Felton-Koestler, 2015).

We have identified a central ideology that is used to maintain the status quo of white supremacy in schools and schooling in the United States, an ideology captured by the phrase "soft bigotry of low expectations" (SBLE). In this paper, we explore its origins and analyze various ways that it is employed in current discourse about mathematics education. We begin with a vignette that contextualizes the motivation for our analytic interest in SBLE. Next, we present the origins of SBLE and its supporting ideologies. Then we analyze[1] how SBLE is used by media aligned with the political far right and its readers in recent attacks on mathematics education researchers and their CMI scholarship. We present an analysis of this thread of discursive backlash at a national scale, as expressed across television, blog posts, and social media. We then shift our analytic focus to examine the role of SBLE ideology in mainstream discourse about education and by mathematics education organizations. Finally, we conclude the paper with an analysis of how certain language is appropriated by others to marginalize or exclude CMI and support SBLE ideology, thereby maintaining the status quo and reifying whiteness.

Vignette

At the end of 2017, the *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education* published a paper by Rubel (one of this paper's authors) that focused on a set of four equity-directed instructional practices in mathematics.

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[1] Like Valero (2017), we use a rhizomatic (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) approach, with its focus on multiplicity and connections. In this spirit, we cite evidence from academic scholarship, as is traditional, but also from popular television and Twitter.

Rubel synthesized those practices using Gutiérrez's (2007) equity framework to delineate dominant dimensions of equity from critical ones. Rubel identified two of the featured equity-directed instructional practices as conforming to the dominant axis in Gutiérrez's (2007) framework: teaching for understanding, a component of standards-based mathematics instruction (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 2000); and fostering multidimensional participation, a feature of complex instruction (Cohen & Lotan, 1995). These practices map onto dominant dimensions of equity in mathematics education in that their focus is on access to and achievement in mathematics. Rubel showed how the other two equity-directed practices—connecting mathematics content to students' experiences, an aspect of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and providing opportunities for using mathematics to "read and write the world," a feature of teaching mathematics for social justice (Gutstein, 2006), conform to the critical axis in Gutiérrez's (2007) equity framework because they directly address issues of identity and challenge systems of power. Rubel then presented a case study of three white teachers who teach in hyper-segregated schools in underserved sections of New York City, analyzing their struggles with the two critical equity-directed instructional practices in comparison to their successes with the two dominant ones.

Because of the significance of whiteness in reproducing subordination and widening opportunity gaps in and through mathematics education in the United States (Battey & Leyva, 2016; Martin, 2009a, 2009b, 2012; Stinson, 2006), Rubel affirmed, as part of the paper's framing, that whiteness tacitly positions white people, their experiences, and their behaviors as superior (Battey & Leyva, 2016; Martin, 2009b). Citing Picower (2009), Rubel elaborated on a pair of ideological principles that function as ideological "tools of Whiteness" (Picower, 2009, p. 204). First, Rubel argued, as many others have before, that the rhetoric of meritocracy implies that success results from hard work or talent and is not a function of the myriad of institutional structures that mediate opportunities and distribute rewards according to race and social background (Bowles & Gintis, 2002; McIntosh, 1988). The rhetoric of a meritocracy inversely implies that any *lack* of success results from a *lack* of effort or ability (Martin, 2009b) and is not an outcome of "systemic barriers and institutional structures that prevent opportunity and success" (Milner, 2012, p. 704). A corollary is the valorization of "colorblindness" for teachers and schools, another "tool of Whiteness" (Picower, 2009, p. 204). Colorblindness, or the avoidance or denial of signifying students' races in curriculum, classrooms, and schools, ignores the causes and impact of enduring racial stratification (Martin, 2008).

Possibly notified by search engine alerts programmed to detect phrases related to whiteness, white supremacists found Rubel's message sufficiently threatening to be newsworthy. They twisted its framing and blasted hyperbolic, misleading, and inaccurate headlines such as "Meritocracy Is a Tool of Whiteness" (Cicotta, 2018); "Working Hard in the Classroom Is Now Racist" (Arie, 2018); "Lib Prof Just Said Teachers Who Grade Based On Merit Are 'A Tool Of Whiteness,'" (Reynolds, 2018) or "Merit and Math Are Tools of 'Whiteness." (2018) We share the preceding vignette as a way to contextualize our noticing that as these stories spread across white nationalist news sites, blogs, and social media pages, a recurrent comment surfaced: a calling out of "the soft bigotry of low expectations." As we have come to learn, this phrase is

one that is dog-whistled,[2] repeated, and nodded at across national discourse about mathematics education (and in other spheres of social concerns).

A Historical Perspective: Origin of the "Soft Bigotry of Low Expectations"

The phrase "the soft bigotry of low expectations" was coined by President George W. Bush[3] in 2000 in a speech to the NAACP that marked the launching of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. Bush asserted, "Discrimination is still a reality, even when it takes different forms. Instead of Jim Crow, there's racial redlining and profiling. Instead of separate but equal, there is separate and forgotten" (George W. Bush's Speech to the NAACP, 2000). After promising that his administration would enforce civil rights, Bush announced that he would be confronting "another form of bias: *the soft bigotry of low expectations…*" (George W. Bush's Speech to the NAACP, 2000). He acknowledged that educational achievement gaps fall along socioeconomic and racial lines, but evaded discussing any systemic causes of these gaps. Instead, Bush argued that it is these school achievement gaps that produce discrimination, as if their direction of causality pointed in only one direction. Through this logic, fundamental and underlying systemic inequities are overlooked by a focus that is limited to the outcomes of those inequities. Bush then offered a prelude to his vision for NCLB, as a

> great movement of education reform [that] has begun in this country built on clear principles: to raise the bar of standards, expect every child can learn; to give schools the flexibility to meet those standards; to measure progress and insist upon results; to blow the whistle on failure; to provide parents with options to increase their option, like charters and choice; and also remember the role of education is to leave no child behind. (George W. Bush's Speech to the NAACP, 2000)

The NCLB Act passed in 2001 as federal legislation with broad, bipartisan support and heralded the current era of high-stakes accountability in education. Positioned as a way to identify teachers and schools "in need of improvement," at its core is a vision about standardization of curriculum and assessment that requires districts to disaggregate and report testing data in terms of race and socioeconomic status. The logic of accountability is that educational equity and justice can be achieved by holding school districts accountable in this way, using performance as measured by standardized tests. Effectively, standardized test scores were legislated to be the most significant measure of learning. Differences between racial groups on those tests are viewed as products of ineffective schools or as evidence of low expectations of individual teachers—all forming "soft bigotry." An essential problem with this orientation to education is that it sidesteps any discussion of broader, systemic, structural racism and thereby fails to acknowledge or address the role of white supremacy in US education systems. Beyond its fundamental role in the articulation of NCLB, the term "soft bigotry of low expectations" and its ideology continue to be at the heart of discourse about education and US schooling. We will show how this ideology is used by the

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2   Dog-whistling is the practice of sending a message that takes on a different or additional meaning for a specific subgroup. Just as dogs can hear sounds at frequencies that humans cannot, the targeted subgroup is meant to hear something different in the message than other readers do.

3   Michael Gerson, Bush's head speechwriter, is credited with penning phrases such as "the soft bigotry of low expectations" and "axis of evil." He is also credited as having been highly influential in developing the direction of Bush's policies in addition to their accompanying rhetoric. Gerson described the governance strategy of Bush's administration as an "activist approach," and described the No Child Left Behind initiative as activism focused "on minority education problems" (Baker, 2006).

American political far right and, perhaps surprisingly to some readers, by the political mainstream, as well as by mathematics education organizations. In all cases, as we will demonstrate, SBLE ideology is ultimately used to defend or maintain white supremacy in mathematics education.

SBLE and White Supremacists in the United States

As described above using the example of Rubel's (2017) paper, recent scholarship that challenges the role of white supremacy in mathematics education has, at times, been met with intense backlash from the political far-right media and its white supremacist readership, as well as with violent, misogynistic, racist, anti-Semitic, and homophobic personal attacks on the scholars themselves (Gutiérrez, 2017b, 2018). This accompanying violence attests to the deeply political and controversial debates around mathematics education and to the personal risks inherent in challenging the status quo. Our analysis reveals examples of how white nationalists use accusations of SBLE to defend white supremacy through two central tactics.

Tactic 1: The Racist Pot Uses SBLE to Call the Kettle Black

One way that white supremacists counter critiques of racism is through a tactic known as "blame-shifting." This tactic is a self-defense maneuver in which white supremacists defend themselves against the charge of racism by shifting that charge onto the critique itself. Consider the example of the November 2017 attack on mathematics education scholar and activist Rochelle Gutiérrez. Gutiérrez (2017a) presented two ways in which school mathematics operates in US society as whiteness: (a) when the mathematics created by white people is the only mathematics that is taught in school and (b) when mathematics is used as a way to sort, filter, and judge people (see Gutiérrez, 2017b, 2018 for her analyses of this attack). One strategy used to attempt to delegitimize these arguments was to blame-shift by asserting that Gutiérrez's resistance to white supremacy was itself racist and an example of SBLE. Figure 1 shows a representative example. Gutiérrez's critique was that mathematics operates as whiteness in that only what is seen as European or White mathematics is valued and taught in schools, even though a myriad of cultures produced significant mathematics. Referencing SBLE here implies that Gutiérrez's thesis of mathematics operating as whiteness instead *underestimates* Black students, lowers expectations in mathematics for them, and is an indicator of implicit, "soft" bigotries. Thus, a "reverse" charge of racism is used to redirect Gutiérrez's critique of racism, a blame-shifting process that may represent an effort to distract many social media readers.

Blame-shifting in general is a known manipulative psychological tactic that can evoke defensiveness or even a mistrust of one's own intentions and judgment.[4] Consider the image selected to accompany the charge in Figure 1. In relationship to the text that accompanies it—the explicit deployment of SBLE in the context of a Twitter discussion about mathematics education in the United States—an image of cheerful Africans in ethnic dress, is placed inappropriately. The image at once evokes an array of negative stereotypes about African Americans and distances African Americans as *others* from an American belongingness; along with the accompanying charge of SBLE, the image of Black people who are smiling and cheering casts African Americans as somehow gleeful yet duped. As a rhetorical move, this blame-shifting is a dog whistle to other white supremacists, messaging that functions to stoke collective racial anxiety (Boyce, 2017). This kind of blame-shift maneuver, using accusations of

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4   In the psychological literature, this is referred to as "defensive projection" (Newman, Duff, & Baumeister, 1997).

SBLE, is used by white supremacists to stifle any attempts to redress past and current racism by asserting that the plea for justice is racist itself.

Figure 1. Tweet as part of attack on Gutiérrez

In Figure 2, we show a second example of purported SBLE being used to delegitimize resistance to white supremacy in mathematics education by blame-shifting charges of racism, this time directed at Rubel.[5] The tweet's author does not accept Rubel's (widely accepted) critique that the narrative of the United States functioning as a meritocracy is a myth. Instead, its author premises that there is meritocracy in mathematics and a single, agreed-upon way to "do math correctly," as well as that white people achieve greater success in mathematics because they are "inherently intellectually superior." Again, we see here a blame-shifting of the critique of white supremacy ("you believe black people are too stupid to do math correctly" and "this is really disappointing"), concluding in the accusation of SBLE. This inversion not only redirects Rubel's critique but also reinforces the very tenets of white supremacy in mathematics.
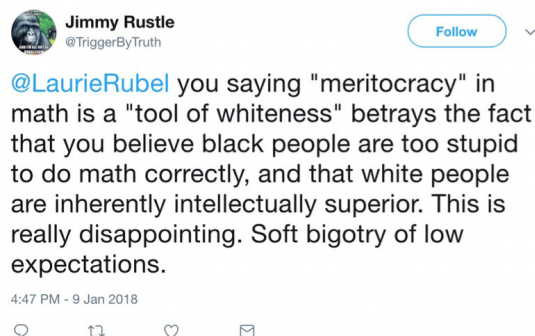

Figure 2. Tweet as part of attack on Rubel

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5   As with the tweet in Figure 1, we have excerpted this tweet from a longer stream or thread of a kind of Twitter conversation or exchange. We have no way of knowing whether the tweet's authors in fact align themselves with white supremacy/nationalism or even if these tweets were generated by actual human beings, so we make no claims about the tweet's author. Our analysis in this section is focused on the discursive function of SBLE to further or reinforce white supremacy/nationalism, which does not depend on any kind of assignment of membership, kinship, or association to the tweets' authors.

Tactic 2: Using SBLE to Reinforce Math as Colorblind and Meritocratic

A second way that SBLE is used by white supremacists is to reify one of the ideological "tools of whiteness" (Picower, 2009), namely the claim that the United States functions as a colorblind meritocracy. That view in turn implies that mathematics, as well as systems of mathematics education learning in the United States, are colorblind, neutral, and meritocratic. To demonstrate this tactic, we present **a video segment** that aired on national television as a commentary on Rubel's (2017) journal article.[6] The show's white male host began by presenting another instance of the same blame-shifting tactic, asserting that "to deem achievement-based reward as racist suggests that certain students can't handle academic effort" ("Gutfeld," 2018, 00:52–1:00). The host then pointed blame at "teachers who seek to reduce education to mere identity politic[s] algebra" (1:08–1:13), showing a photograph of Rubel. The panel's two white women responded that "math is math" (1:37) and "math is hard" (1:41), promoting a view of mathematics as colorblind ("math is math") and at the same time attesting to the privilege afforded to it in our society ("math is hard"). The host and panelists are using the "tools of Whiteness" critiqued in Rubel's paper to defend white supremacy.

Next, the second white male panelist continued to defend white supremacy by making the following argument: Societal systems and the distribution of rewards and opportunities in general are clearly just. How else could we explain that Blacks dominate the NBA? The NBA is "mostly Black," he said, "because Blacks are the best players" (2:08–2:17). Instead of considering the array of societal systems that have led to Black preeminence in the NBA, his reasoning that Blacks dominate the NBA because they are naturally better athletes insidiously justifies white dominance in every other arena, including the ownership and management of sports leagues. By analogy, according to the panelist, the people who are at the "top" of mathematics and mathematics education domains are there because they are naturally superior in those areas. Although Rubel's (2017) argument that race plays a significant role in mathematics education was summarily dismissed, the show's host then claimed that short-statured people experience discrimination. This claim is not refuted or ridiculed, effectively further trivializing Rubel's argument. To conclude the television segment, the male panelist of color cautioned against (presumably Black) students being cast as incapable by teachers or schools, a threat he described as "the bigotry of low expectations" (03:52–3:54).

As yet another example, we turn to Figure 3, a screenshot of part of a stream of 865 comments on Breitbart's story in response to their coverage of Rubel's (2017) paper. The discussion demonstrates a prevalent misinterpretation of Rubel's critique of the rhetoric of meritocracy. To these commenters, the notion that there is inequitable access to opportunities to learn mathematics is untenable. Instead, comments such as those by "Mojave_Forks" and "GoodToHateEvil" interpret the charge of inequitable access to mathematics education as a critique of what they view to be a fair and meritocratic opportunity and rewards systems. The affirmation of the rhetoric of meritocracy is then quickly used to justify blame-shifting the charges of racism ("Seems like she's suggesting blacks can't compete based on merit"), expressed, again, as SBLE. The final comment in this stream, by "VetMike," claims that "the Left" uses SBLE to continue to marginalize and oppress Black people, a line of thinking that we examine later.

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6   Skepticism about our thesis that white supremacists found this message threatening should consider the question of how many and which mathematics education research articles are covered by Fox News.
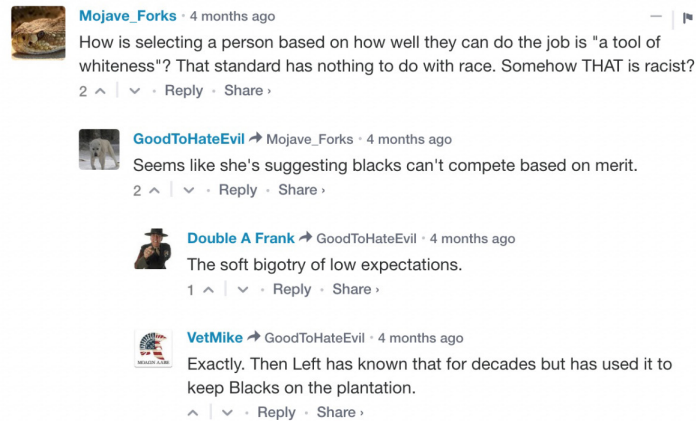
Figure 3. Discussion on Breitbart comment board about Rubel's article

Viewing the processes that lead to achievement in mathematics as meritocratic allows for a reaffirmation and reinscription of the tenets of white supremacy. In the tweets in Figure 3, this leads to the claim that Rubel (2017) is suggesting that we should *lower expectations* of mathematics proficiency for children of color, which is, in the white supremacist/nationalist view, akin to affirmative action in mathematics education. This then leads to rhetoric about whether it would be desirable for society to condone the licensing of doctors or other professionals who have performed poorly in school mathematics. Interestingly, it is occupations that are seen as directly related to public health (rather than the work of teachers or urban planners or even mathematicians) that are put forward as professions that are seen to fundamentally rely on success in mathematics. This argument, of course, presumes that creating more equitable opportunities for children of color to learn mathematics would result in anything but excellence. And, as readers can see through the emblematic examples in Figures 4 and 5, selected from the same Breitbart comment stream, the defense of white supremacy is expressed with aggression, using thinly veiled personal threats of violence.
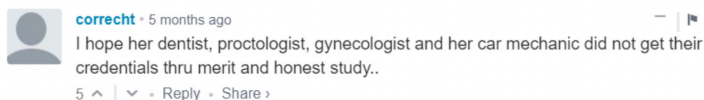

Figure 4. Tweet by "Oceandiva" on Breitbart

Figure 5. Tweet by "Correcht" on Breitbart

How SBLE Is Used by the Mainstream: Less Overt, Just as Dangerous?

We now turn our attention to the political mainstream[7] in the United States. While references to SBLE are used as a dog-whistle discursive weapon by white nationalists, as demonstrated above, we argue that SBLE ideology also undergirds "education reform" efforts put forward and supported by the mainstream, including those who may identify as "liberal" or "progressive." These efforts propagate a widespread belief about education that centers on standardized testing, accountability, school choice, and the support and growth of charter schools. Although NCLB was introduced by a Republican president, the Democratic party's enthusiastic support of NCLB led to an expansion of its associated policies through both terms of the Obama presidency. NCLB's casting of high-stakes standardized testing and standardization of curriculum as civil rights initiatives has been shown to be deceptive, to narrow conceptions of teaching and learning, and ultimately to reinforce the rhetoric of the United States as a meritocracy. NCLB did not improve test-score gaps; instead, it led to a "curricular and pedagogic squeeze" (Au, 2016, p. 51) that has differentially impacted low-income children of color. Further, NCLB's promotion of a "no-excuses" mentality about learning has led to an overemphasis on compliance and discipline, resulting in an over-policing of students of color, most notably in underserved communities (Battey & Levya, 2016).

NCLB's classifying and sorting processes around accountability initiated upheaval and instability in schools through closures, reopenings, and renamings, instead of seeking or implementing other options for supporting struggling schools (Lipman, 2012). Parents are accorded "school-choice" to opt out of so-called low-performing schools, under the neoliberal logic that market forces will pressure struggling schools to improve and, at the same time, create additional school options for families. However, few families actually take advantage of these choices (Vernez, 2009), perhaps because the market model ignores the fact that schools are rooted in neighborhoods and communities.

President Obama and his education secretary, Arne Duncan, continued the NCLB trajectory for US schools by introducing the Race to the Top initiative in 2009. Race to the Top incentivized the use of student scores on standardized tests as part of evaluating teacher and principal effectiveness. This practice was part of Secretary Duncan's commitment to "data-driven education reform," an approach to education that involves firing large numbers of teachers, closing schools, expanding charter schools, and promoting school choice. And finally, the widespread and pervasive concern with "gap gazing" (Gutiérrez, 2008), mandated by NCLB, has been widely taken up in educational research and policies with its logic rarely questioned, thereby constricting visions of teaching and of learning as well as imaginings of educational justice. Just as the ideology, laws, and policies of the mainstream Left have contributed significantly to mass incarceration of Black people (Murakawa, 2014), we posit that the ideology, laws, and policies of the mainstream (including the Left) around education, although expressed as intending to *improve* racial justice, have expanded and further entrenched inequities in education. The ideology of SBLE has been fundamental to the appeal of NCLB to politicians and voters from *both* sides of the political aisle and has remained fundamental to the ensuing and ongoing movement of "education reform."

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7   By "mainstream" we are referring to neighbors, colleagues, programs, and organizations who would likely distance them-selves from the types of beliefs espoused by white nationalists/supremacists. Individuals in the mainstream might identify as "politically left," "liberal," "progressive," or even "fiscally conservative" and would find the hateful rhetoric in the alt-right Twitterverse to be racist and highly objectionable.

Even Closer to Home: SBLE Ideology Within Mathematics Education

Here we draw heavily on the work of our colleagues, especially Rochelle Gutiérrez and Danny Martin, trailblazers in theorizing about and documenting systemic inequities in US mathematics education. Gutiérrez and Martin have called for professional mathematics education organizations, like the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) to acknowledge their participation in maintaining an inequitable status quo (Gutiérrez, 2017a; Martin, 2015, 2018; McCloskey, Lawler, & Chao, 2017). One way that NCTM has been complicit in using and propagating the ideology of SBLE is through rhetoric that confines determination of success in mathematics to individuals, teachers, or schools. Prominent across documents from NCTM's *Principles and Standards* (2000), as well as their more current *Principles to Actions* (2014), is rhetoric that emphasizes individual students and their teachers with a focus on productive beliefs, high expectations, and effort.[8] Such rhetoric has largely ignored systemic inequities and injustices in education in general and, in mathematics education in particular (Emdin, 2018). We interpret this positioning of the path toward equity in mathematics education as one that relies mainly on raising teachers' expectations for students of color, implicitly nodding once again toward SBLE.

Ignoring systemic injustices and inequitable learning opportunities while focusing only on individual teachers' expectations or on student psychology (for example, by fostering attributes like growth mindset, or grit) reifies the ideology of a color blind, politically neutral, and meritocratic system of mathematics education (Gutiérrez, 2017a; Ladson-Billings, 2017; Zavala & Hand, 2017). This was the heart of Martin's (2015) critique of *Principles to Actions:* that despite the repeated calls for equity contained within the document, it continually asserts that the primary obstacles to equity are the "unproductive beliefs" (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 2014) held by stakeholders, such as teachers, students, or administrators. In *Principles to Actions*, NCTM continued the trend of placing the "blame" for and the "solution" to inequities within individual people's sphere of influence without sufficient acknowledgement of systematic, historic, and institutional patterns of oppression. Such denials converge with the same set of ideologies that support white supremacy and protect and promote the use of accusations of SBLE against advocates of CMI.

SBLE and the Mathematics Education Research Community

Our final group of interest here is the mathematics education research community. In our own experience, both as researchers and as providers of professional development for and with teachers around CMI, we have often faced the pointed question, "Where is the math?" When posed by parents, teachers, or principals, this question is usually part of a concern that classroom CMI learning goals are not focused enough on mathematics. When posed by journal reviewers or editors, the "Where's the math?" question

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8   Here we follow Martin's (2015) "more critical look at NCTM's equity-oriented message and politics" (p. 19). Martin observed that NCTM has been calling for equity in mathematics teaching for many years, but that in *Principles to Actions*, as in others of its documents and statements, NCTM framed its vision of "Mathematics for All," in part, in terms of "beliefs and expectations" (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 2014). In this particular framing of the problem of inequity, the beliefs of individual people (teachers, students, etc.) are at once the cause of and a solution to racism. At the same time, in *Principles to Actions* NCTM did not acknowledge the systemic and historic nature of persistent inequities in conditions and outcomes, nor the role that "neutral" fields, like mathematics, or "well-meaning" institutions, such as NCTM, have played in perpetuating these inequities.

is usually part of a critique or rejection of a study that claims to investigate mathematics learning but seemingly without enough specificity or attention to the discipline of mathematics. In general, the "Where is the math?" critique is usually used to signal either that mathematics is not foregrounded enough among social phenomena or that the mathematics is not rigorous enough. "Doing mathematics" and "doing critical inquiry" are sometimes positioned as a zero-sum pair because it is argued that when trying to do both, one must either overly simplify the social phenomenon or trivialize the mathematics (Dowling & Burke, 2012).

We agree with the commitment to the position that mathematics should remain central in mathematics education research (Harel, 2010). However, we also take seriously the ideas of Pais and Valero (2012), who cast doubt on the often unquestioned premise that rectification of a social injustice will occur solely through the application of better or more mathematics and who suggest that we instead consider how the (mis)use of mathematics often *exacerbates* injustices. We identify at least two problems with the "Where's the math?" query. First, the article "the" in that question reinscribes the fallacious notion that there is a single mathematics when, in actuality, every culture has produced and continues to produce mathematics; even "school mathematics" is its own particular type of mathematics that is distinct from the academic mathematics practiced by professional mathematics (Bishop, 1988; Gutiérrez, 2017a). Second, implicit in the "Where's the math?" question is an over-privileging of mathematics-related concerns about students' material and social selves, even in the context of a scholarly focus on mathematics learning environments or as part of working in mathematics classes toward achieving equity and social justice.

The reflexive questioning from within our mathematics education research community of "Where's the math?" is connected to SBLE and its ideologies in how the question is readily recruited and then mis-appropriated by other groups in service of their arguments for marginalizing critical inquiry in mathematics education. Consider the example presented in Figure 6, a tweet on Breitbart in response to the white nationalist coverage of Rubel's (2017) article on equity-directed instructional practices. The tweet's author warns that equity perspectives about mathematics education imply a watering or "dumbing down … to foster the illusion of an education while sidestepping its demands." In other words, critiquing and trying to redress unjust educational systems around mathematics education are positioned as equivalent to a "dumbing down" of mathematics. Similarly, in Figure 7, we see "Alyzza" posing the question, "What … kind of math is that?! How about this: 1+1=2," another often repeated attack across these comment streams. The "Where's the math?" or in this case, "What kind of math is that?" question expresses the belief that the recommendation of engaging in CMI implies that there is some kind of other (presumably incorrect) mathematical logic.[9]

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9   The idea that one plus one is two is a tautology is challenged by Fasheh (1982), who aptly points out that "one equals one" might be a mathematical fact, but that its "description and interpretation and application differ from one situation to another and from one culture to another. A fresh and delicious apple is not equal to a rotten apple. . . . One dollar in 1970 is not equal to one dollar in 1980. And so on. Strictly speaking, then, 'one equals one' does not have true instances or applications in the real world" (p. 5).

Figure 6. Comment by "N=1" on Breitbart

Figure 6. Comment by "Alyzza" on Daily Mail

Conclusion

In current US education rhetoric and practice, neoliberal values and corresponding mechanisms, such as those listed above—accountability, school choice, and standardization—are viewed as the appropriate and exclusive means to improve and measure public schooling, and even to frame discussions of it. Furthermore, as race scholar DiAngelo has described, the neoliberal legacy in Enlightenment thought has sustained the pillars of individualism, independence, and self-determinism that are the hallmarks of the US origin story (General Commission on Religion and Race of the UMC, 2017). The Enlightenment's hyperrationality and ahistoricity are still with us when we find ourselves trapped in the binary thinking that has characterized much discourse about mathematics teaching and learning and that has served to limit all of our students. Accordingly, "skills" and "understanding" have been framed as polar opposites (or at least as conflicting values), as have other pairs of terms, such as "concepts" and "procedures," and—relevant to those of us who have tried to speak and work for CMI—"rigor" and "equity" (Blintz & Moore, 2011). As we have shown in this article, any time we make reference to the historical, cultural, and political conditions that shape *all* of our conditions and expectations, we are vulnerable to inquiries from members of our own mathematics education research community, who ask, "Where's the math?"; to cautions from mainstream mathematics education organizations that we are sacrificing mathematical "rigor"; or to accusations from all sides that we are perpetuating the "soft bigotry of low expectations."

At a basic level, we believe that our analysis of the origins, underlying ideology, and various current uses of the concept of SBLE—whether they are expressed in word, belief, or practice—should serve to contextualize its meanings and diffuse its potency in instances of future attacks on mathematics educators. More broadly, we believe that this analysis further specifies how concepts like SBLE are seeded and then recruited in various ways and serve to maintain the status quo of white supremacy in and through mathematics education. We hope that bringing our analysis into mainstream discourse about education, into the discourse of mathematics education organizations, and into the mathematics education research community extends the understanding that SBLE rhetoric and ideology are not limited to those who brazenly align with white supremacy and white nationalism. While we agree with Audre Lorde (1983) that "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," it is necessary to take an honest look at the bricks used to construct that house and on whose backs the house is built.

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